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Mirroring-Drifting – Lam Lin-tung and film aesthetics

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Abstract

The social, political and cultural complexity of post-war Hong Kong (1945–1997) produced a highly fragmented, unsystematic, and historically transient mode of critical debate on the cinema. One film scholar, however, Lam Nin-tung (林年同 Lin Niantong, 1944–1990), tried to systematize the debate and proposed a thought-provoking idea: *jing you* [geng jau 鏡游] or mirroring-drifting. In this article, I argue that Lam's theory is best understood as an attempt to re-examine the relationship between the subject and the object in cinematic *perception*, a project motivated by a subjectival crisis embedded within the social, cultural and political complexity of the historical period.

Keywords

Hong Kong film theory

Chinese film theory

Lam Nin-tung (Lin Nian-tong)

jing you/geng jau

Chinese aesthetics

post-war Hong Kong cinema

The study of Chinese film theory – in itself a contestable term – has so far focused on the critical writings published in Shanghai and Hong Kong between the 1920s and 1940s.¹ When it comes to post-war colonial Hong Kong (1945–1997), most film critics and scholars today

would argue that there had never been a systematic discourse or unified theoretical framework.² This is not to say that Hong Kong did not have any form of critical debate on cinema. On the contrary, as early as the 1920s, Cantonese film-makers and theatre artists wrote prolifically in newspapers, magazines and film journals, and between the 1940s and 1960s intellectual émigrés from Shanghai also participated in the discourse.³ Later, between the 1960s and 1980s, a new generation of local writers conducted a vibrant discussion of film criticism in the *Zhongguo xuesheng zhoubao* (*Zunggwok hoksaang zaubou*)/*Chinese Students Weekly* (the 1960s), *Da texie* (*Daa dakse*)/*Close-up* (the 1970s), and *Dianying shuangzhoukan* (*Dinjing soengzauhon*)/*Film Biweekly* (the 1980s; renamed in the 1990s in English as *City Entertainment*). Many of these critics formed the Huoniao dianyinghui (Foniudinjingwui or Phoenix Film Club) during the 1970s, which became the hotbed of the Hong Kong New Wave (c. 1978–1982). It is indeed astonishing that no theoretical frameworks can be deduced from such a vivacious culture of film criticism, especially given the social, political, and cultural complexity of the time, as many of these film writings and cultural debates were sites where the differences – both actual and imaginary – between Shanghai and Hong Kong, China and Euro-America, the Mainland and Hong Kong, socialism and capitalism were actively negotiated.

Yet, perhaps the social, political and cultural complexity of the time was responsible for the highly fragmented, unsystematic, and historically transient mode of critical production in post-war Hong Kong cinema. During this period, however, one film scholar, Lam Nin-tung (林年同 Lin Niantong, 1944–1990), made a tremendous effort to organize the various threads of thoughts in Hong Kong film criticism, and eventually propose an idea that is still considered today as one of the most thought-provoking critical term in Chinese film theory: *jing you* [*geng jau* 鏡游], often translated as lens-drifting, but better understood as mirroring-drifting. In this article, I argue that Lam's theory is best understood as a conscious attempt in

post-war Hong Kong to re-examine the relationship between the subject and the object in cinematic perception. In fact, one may even consider it a project of exploring the potentialities left behind when the positionalities between the spectator, the image, and reality are desubjectivized, an exploration motivated by a subjectival crisis embedded within the social, cultural and political complexity of the historical period. In this article, I first historicize and contextualize Lam's theoretical writings in relation to the socio-political background of post-war colonial Hong Kong. I then examine the aesthetic concepts he inherited from China and Euro-America and tease out the philosophical background of his theory. Finally, I conduct a close reading of his essay, 'Zhongguo dianying de kongjian yishi' ('Zunggwok dinjing dik hunggaan jisik')/'The spatial consciousness of Chinese cinema' (Lam 1983: 58–85), from which the concept 'mirroring-drifting' is first proposed.

Lam Lin-tung and Hong Kong's extraterritoriality

Lam was born in Guangdong (Kwangtung) in 1944 and grew up in Hong Kong in the 1950s. When he studied philosophy at New Asia College (now part of the Chinese University of Hong Kong), he began writing articles of film criticism for the *Chinese Students Weekly* and *Daxue shenghuo* (*Daaihok sangwut*)/*College Life*. After his graduation, he worked as a screenwriter for the Cathay Motion Picture Co. (1968–1971) and as a producer for the Yangtze Film (HK) Ltd. (1971–1972). Between 1972 and 1977, Lam studied his Ph.D. in art history at the University of Bologna. After his graduation, he taught at the Hong Kong Baptist College (now Baptist University of Hong Kong) and established the Zhongguo dianying xuehui (Zunggwok dinjing hokwui)/Hong Kong Chinese Film Association (Tay 1996: n.p.). During this period, he continued to write articles for *Close-up* and, later on, for *Film Biweekly*. In 1985, a collection of his critical essays was published under the

provocative title *Jing you (Geng jau)/Mirroring-Drifting*. His prolific career as a film scholar was unfortunately cut short on 19 May 1990, when he died of liver cancer.

At first glance, it is tempting to define ‘mirroring-drifting’ in *Chinese* terms. For example, William Tay (1996: n.p.) argues, ‘*Jing (geng)* refers to the camera lens or a *jingjian (genggaam)*/mirror. *Yau (jau)* not only refers to Lam’s roaming in the environment of Chinese cinema, but also the concept of *you (jau)*/drifting in Chinese aesthetics’. To a certain extent, Lam’s lifelong devotion to the study of Chinese cinema and to creating a comparative space between Chinese and Euro-American aesthetics may give us the impression that he sought to assert *Chineseness* in cinema studies. Yet, how Lam understood Chineseness was highly debatable. As a first-generation émigré from the Mainland who grew up in Hong Kong, Lam was inculcated at home and school with the idea that the Chinese mainland was ultimately his ‘homeland’, though between the closing of the Sino-British border in 1950 and its reopening in 1978, this homeland was practically inaccessible to Hong Kongers. To complicate matters, between 1937 and 1987, Hong Kong became a site of social, political and cultural contention between sympathizers, supporters and members of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Kuomintang (KMT, Guomindang, or Nationalist Party). Nonetheless, these sympathizers and supporters did not necessarily approve of the political stances or official policies of their respective parties. For example, a Hong Kong leftist might believe in socialism or communism, but they might find themselves at odds with CCP’s policies and political mechanism. In fact, she or he might even be persecuted had she or he chosen to live in the Mainland (Chung 2011: 35–49; Law 2009: 111–24; Ng 2009: 101–10; Teo [1997] 1999: 14–27; Zhou 2011: 53–68).

Amid such political contestations, the official policy of the British colonial government – at least until Chris Patten assumed office as Governor in July 1992 – was to depoliticize Hong Kong by foregrounding its role as a trading port free of any political

intervention (Welsh 1993: 441–501). Elsewhere, I traced this policy back to the nineteenth-century concept of extraterritoriality, first formalized in 1844 in the Treaty of Wanghia (Wangxia) between the Qing empire (1644–1911) and the United States, which stipulated that US citizens be judged in accordance with their own law, ‘a clause that was then copied and provided for in all subsequent treaties between China and other European nation states’ (Fan 2015b: 391, 2015c: 38; Ruskola 2013: 128–42). In the eyes of the Euro-American nation states, extraterritoriality was a colonial privilege, which effectively suspended the European principle of *lex terrae*/law of the land), i.e. sovereign authority should be instantiated by a political power’s right to exercise the force-of-law in its own territory (Schmitt [1950] 2006: 132). In the eyes of the Qing court, this was originally considered a right guaranteed by the Qing code, which stipulated that any Qing subject be judged in accordance with the law of her or his ethnic community or region, but was later on redefined as a colonial privilege after the signing of the Treaty of Shimonoseki in 1895 with Japan (Cassel 2012: 63–84; Fan 2015b: 392). In European terms, extraterritoriality, as Carl Schmitt ([1950] 2006: 172 and 184) argues, effectively turned colonized ‘territories’ into *mare liberum*/free sea, that is, trading ports free of any unified and coherent sovereign intervention. Even though Hong Kong, unlike Shanghai, was formally colonized by Great Britain, the principle of extraterritoriality was practiced in court, arguably until 1972 (Cassel 2012: 112–13).

The lack of any unified and coherent sovereign authority, or the coexistence of conflicting modes of juridical, political, social and cultural practices and values, had a profound impact on the political subjectivity and sociocultural identity of Hong Kongers. As Jon D. Solomon (2004: 230–35) argues, a condition such as extraterritoriality severed sovereignty (which was in a constant state of crisis) from the state or apparatus of governance. As a result, the state or government drew its power by making visible – through juridical,

political, and sociocultural means – that the community of lives it governed was in a perpetual state of exception.⁴ In other words, these lives were actively depoliticized and desubjectivized as biological beings whose sole objective was to function as bodies that produced and consumed. In the case of post-war colonial Hong Kong, many émigrés clung to the idea of ‘China’ as a symbolic substitute of the lack of any effective presence of Chinese state power. Meanwhile, they were deterred to form any affective affiliation with Great Britain because they were fundamentally excluded from being subjectivized as Britons based on the principle of extraterritoriality. What complicated matters was that during the Cold War (in the case of China, roughly between 1949 and 1987), the coexistence of two contesting claimants to sovereign authority – the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and the Republic of China (ROC) – denaturalized the concept of sovereign authority and made visible its performativity.⁵ To make such disillusionment even worse, the 1967 Leftist Riots, which lasted eighteen months with 51 casualties (including the brutal killing of radio host Lam Bun [1929–1967]), 800 sustained injuries and 2000 criminal convictions, traumatized many Hong Kongers as they witnessed the instantiation of these contesting sovereign claims in the form of animal violence (Cheung 2009: 131–42|| 223).

The extraterritorial status of Hong Kong, the desubjectivization of its mere lives caught between two conflicting sovereign claims and under a colonial power, and their linguistic marginality inspired Lam to regard Cantonese cinema from the 1950s as a site where these issues were actively negotiated. In 1969, two years after the Riots, Lam (1969: 10) pointed out the liminal position of the classical Cantonese cinema between three existing ways by which Chinese cinema had been conceived: *guoyu dianying* (*gwokjyu dinjing* or national-language cinema), *Zhongguo dianying* (*Zunggwok dinjing* or Chinese cinema), and *Zhongwen dianying* (*Zungman dinjing* or Chinese-language cinema). Lam argues that for most people, Cantonese cinema could not be considered a national-language cinema because

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in their imagination, China's national cinema is the Putonghua (Mandarin). Yet, the Putonghua is in fact a language constructed academically and politically based on the Beijing and North-east dialects, which not only sounds different from the way Mandarin is spoken on the street but is also detached from the lived experience of the working class in these regions. Meanwhile, the term 'Chinese cinema' ignores the contesting sovereign claims between the PRC and the ROC, and Hong Kong's in-between-ness as a colony. Finally, the term 'Chinese-language cinema' overlooks the linguistic divide between *yu* (spoken languages, including dialects, which have been historically diverse) and *wen* (written languages, including classical and modern written Chinese, which have been historically standardized) by imposing the Euro-American concept of a linguistic system onto the Chinese case.

After his return from Bologna, Lam revisited this problem in his seminal essay, 'Wushi niandai yueyu pian yanjiu zhong de jige wenti' ('Ngsap nindoi jyutjyu pin jingau zung dik geigo mantai')/ 'Several questions on the study of Cantonese cinema in the 1950s' (1978), in which Lam deconstructs the notion of the nation and national language by historicizing the emergence of these concepts between the Song dynasty (960–1279) and the New Literary Movement (c. 1919–1930):

Even though Cantonese cinema does not share the long creative history of dialect literature, its development – especially in the 1950s – is best understood as a part, or in fact, a direct descendant, of the New Literary Movement. The New literary movement treated dialect literatures seriously. When it first started, some writers wrote with [their own] northern dialects. Then soon, writers in other regions began to compose in their native languages.... Meanwhile, there are numerous examples of writers who used Cantonese as the linguistic medium, including Fu Gongwang (Fu Gung-mong, 1911–77), Ouyang Shan (Auyoeng San, 1908–2004) and Chen Canyon

(Can Canwan, 1914–2002). Such a phenomenon could be traced back to the *xiaoci* (petite lyric) from the Song dynasty, the *xiaoshuo* (novel), the *xiqu* (theatrical songs) of the Yuan (1271–1368) and Ming (1368–1644) dynasties, and the *suqu* (vernacular melodies) sung in the *lidiao* (local neighbourhood speeches) the Ming and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties. We should therefore understand dialect cinema as a cultural form that emerged out of this line of literary tradition. (Lam 1978: 2)

For Lam, national consciousness is not supposed to be a unified subjectivity tailor-made by the political claimants to sovereign authority, i.e. the PRC and the ROC. Instead, the semi-feudal and semi-colonial conditions of China in general and the colonial condition of Hong Kong locally generated an assemblage of disorganized, fragmented, mutually contesting, and often historically transient political affects and senses of in-group belongings, which were constantly delegitimized by the various modes of state power and socio-political structures.⁶ Cantonese cinema was therefore the ‘Chinese intellectuals’ larger awakening from the nation’s semi-feudal and semi-colonial conditions’, or in other words, a cry for re-examining their status of desubjectivization (Lam 1978: 2).

Mirroring-Drifting – A philosophical investigation

The response to desubjectivization, for Lam, is not resubjectivization. Rather, the idea of ‘mirroring-drifting’ can be understood – at least in the first instance – as a way to explore the state of desubjectivization as an approach to life that is free from any sovereign claims or political powers, and as a new mode of connection between human lives. I have so far used the term desubjectivization, in the light of biopolitics, as a process by which political subjects are depoliticized as mere biological lives. However, if such a process, according to Michel

Foucault ([1978] 2002: 178) and Giorgio Agamben ([1995] 1998: 1–2), is indeed the same process that turns lives into subjects under political power (i.e., ironically, into political subjects), subjectivization and desubjectivization are simply two ways by which politics can be seen and described. For Agamben, a constructive way of looking at desubjectivization is to consider it as a remainder of this de/politicizing process, i.e. the time it takes for politics to end, when the difference between subjectivity and desubjectivity is dissolved (Vacarme 2004: 116).

Understanding the cinema as a *jing (geng)*/mirror can be traced back to the Shanghai film and aesthetic theories from the 1930s and to the European psychoanalytic film theory during from the 1960s and 1970s. In 1933, screenwriter and avant-garde fiction writer Liu Na'ou (1905–1940) wrote an article in film magazine *Xiandai dianying/Modern Screen* called 'Guanyu zuozhe de taidu'/'About the author's attitude, in which he suggests that a cinematic author (i.e. screenwriter or director) approach cinematographic reality with a *mei de guanzhao taidu*/attitude of aesthetic observation-reflection (Liu 1933: 1). For Liu:

The attitude of aesthetic observation-reflection is a quest for grasping the objective fact by infiltrating oneself into the contents, in order that one stays within a silent [state of] observation-reflection; this is a special kind of attitude that allows the author and the observed to become one. (Liu 1933: 1)

I argued elsewhere that Liu's notion of observation-reflection owes to the *photogénie* debate in France between the 1920s and 1940s and the debate on Bergson's *L'Évolution créatrice/Creative Evolution* (1907) in China during the Republican period. Its underlying assumption is that the cinema is a site where the cinematographic image is best understood as a reflection of the force-of-life, or in Bergson's term, *élan vital*/vital impetus, that both the

Commented [VF2]: This is a journal title, not a surname, and should be italicized. This article was translated by the editors of *Vacarme*, and the exact names of the editors are not specified.

beholder and the filmed subject share on a plane of immanence (Bao 2015: 60–75; Bergson [1907] 1998: 26; Epstein ([1926] 2012): 288; Fan 2015a: 93–98; Liu 2009: 41; Zhang et al. 1977: 94–135). And as Lydia Liu (2009: 22) argues, the Republican understanding of Bergson was in fact inflected by the intellectual fascination with reconfiguring Kantian aesthetics through the filter of Buddhism by scholars like Zhang Taiyan (1868–1936) and Wang Guowei (1877–1927) (Liu 2009: 22; Wang [1910] 1961; Zhang [1908] 1980: 4).

For Wang:

The most important criterion in the judgment of *ci* (lyrical poetry) is *jingjie* (environment). When a lyrical poem has *jingjie*, it forms a style on its own [without any human intervention or *technē*] and contains within itself nameable phrases, which should stand above all the others.... There are *you wo zhi jing* (*jing* with me or a self) and *wu wo zhi jing* (*jing* with no me or no self).... In a *jing* with me, ‘I’ observe an object. Therefore, the lyrics would *zhuo wo* (dwell in ‘me’ or live in the form of me). In a *jing* with no me, an object observes another object. Therefore, I cannot distinguish the difference between me and the object.... (Wang [1910] 1961: §1 and 3)

Wang’s idea of *jingjie* comes from *Weishi*/Consciousness-only Buddhism (a branch of Yogachara Buddhism). An environment is best considered a *xiang*/form (or some say, appearance), which encompasses all images (or some say, objects) we are capable of grasping and reaching with our sensorium (eyes, ears, nose, tongue and body), as well as thought and imagination. An environment can be categorized into *xingjing*/environment of nature, in which includes all physical objects and beings that give one’s sense-certainty; *daizhijing*/environment that carries matters, in which one’s sense-certainty is based on one’s inference of the matters one senses; and *duyingjing*/environment of image, in which one’s

sense-certainty is based on illusion or imagination. Every form or appearance can be understood in all these three environments. Thus, one gradually comes to realize that the physical environment one apprehends as one's consciousness (environment of nature) is in fact an inference (environment that carries matters), and eventually, an illusion or imagination (environment of image). When one finally realizes that both the subject and the illusion she or he conjures up in time are imaginary (including time itself), one arrives at the *benti*/ontological basis or *faxing/dharmatā* (Xuelu 2006: 42–54). Such a (non-)state of *wu*/enlightenment is sometimes referred to as *guanzhao*/observation-reflection.

This idea of observation-reflection is in fact carried forward to the concept of *you* (*jau*)/drifting, which refers to 'Qiushui'/'Autumnal Rain' chapter of the *Zhuangzi* (written by Zhuangzi [369–286 BCE], compiled and edited after his death between the third century BCE and second century CE):

莊子與惠子遊於濠梁之上。莊子曰：「儵魚出遊從容，是魚樂也。」惠子曰：「子非魚，安知魚之樂？」莊子曰：「子非我，安知我不知魚之樂？」惠子曰：「我非子，固不知子矣；子固非魚也，子之不知魚之樂全矣。」莊子曰：「請循其本。子曰『汝安知魚樂』云者，既已知吾知之而問我，我知之濠上也。」

Zhuangzi and Huizi *you*/wanders/drifts to the top of a dam over the Hao River.

Zhuangzi said, 'These fish drift around with such ease; this is the pleasure of the fish.'

Huizi said, 'You are not a fish; how do you know the pleasure of fish?' Zhuangzi said,

'You are not *wo/me*; how do you know that *me* does not know nothing about the

pleasure of fish?' Huizi said, '*Me* is not you; of course *me* knows nothing about you.

Since you are not a fish, you cannot know all about the pleasure of a fish.' Zhuangzi

said, 'Please revisit what you said originally. You said, "How do you know the

pleasure of fish?" You have known all along that *wu*/I know it, yet you asked me.

Well then, *me* knows it over the Hao River'. (Chen 1983: 513)

The objective first-person pronoun *wo/me* (now serves as the subject first-person pronoun in modern Chinese) in this passage is usually mistranslated as 'I', which would have been written in classical Chinese as the subjective first-person pronoun *wu*. In this passage, Huizi's underlying assumption is that the relationship between Zhuangzi and the fish is that between a subject and an object, an observer and an observed. By positing Zhuangzi (*me*) as an object, Zhuangzi is now on a *qiwu*/equalizing plane or plane of immanence with the fish. What Zhuangzi suggests is that the pleasure of drifting (as Zhuangzi, Huizi, and the fish all drift), or *xiaoyao*/carefreeness, is common on this equalizing plane; the person who has trouble knowing in this dialogue is not Zhuangzi himself, but Huizi, who, by posing his question, assumes the position of the subject vis-à-vis Zhuangzi and the fish as his objects. Zhuangzi's final retort can be interpreted in two ways: (1) that since Zhuangzi and the fish are now posited as Huizi's objects, who share the same equalizing plane, they therefore share the same pleasure; and (2) that such perception of pleasure, however, is only true as far as Huizi is concerned – that is, it is bound by Huizi's epistemic limit.

Mirroring-Drifting are therefore self-reflexive acts where the agent and patient are the same. Mirroring-Drifting is best understood not as a desubjectivized state, but as *what remains after the process of desubjectivization*, a (non-)state in which the difference between the subject and the object is suspended (if not entirely dissolved). From the perspective of European film theory, Lam extends the agenda of psychoanalytic theories of Jean-Louis Baudry ([1975] 1976: 120 and 123) and Christian Metz ([1975] 1986: 259), who believe that the cinema is an apparatus where the spectator's unconscious imposes a sense of logic (e.g. spatio-temporal continuity) to a series of discrete images in order to reaffirm the imaginary

unity of her or his subjectivity, a restaging of the spectator's mirror stage. In fact, in *Creative Evolution*, Bergson ([1907] 1998: 3) regards the ego as an intellectual invention in order that an individual could splice together temporal stages that seem to be separated by intervals, even though these temporal differences are in fact fabricated by the observer as she or he fails to understand that she or he is in fact part of a continuous whole (plane of immanence). For Bergson:

if this colorless substratum [the ego] is perpetually colored by that which covers it, it is for us, in its indeterminateness, as if it did not exist, since we only perceive what is colored, or, in other words, psychic states. As a matter of fact, this substratum has no reality; it is merely a symbol intended to recall unceasingly to our consciousness the artificial character of the process by which the attention places clean-cut states side by side, where actually there is a continuity which unfolds. (Bergson [1907] 1998: 3–4)

In other words, for Lam, the cinema unveils this colourless substratum that neither exists nor not exists, so that the spectator can find his or her way to arrive at *benti*/ontological basis or *faxing/dharmatā*, where both the subject and the illusion he or she conjures up in time are imaginary.

Mirroring-Drifting: The spatial consciousness of Chinese cinema

In 'The spatial consciousness of Chinese cinema', Lam explicates what he means by mirroring-drifting and how it challenges the subject–object relationship inherent in Euro-American aesthetics. But then, as Lam argues, mirroring-drifting is best understood not as a *Chinese* aesthetics. Rather, it is a 'process of mutual separation and mutual connection

between two spatial theories: *shixue jiegou* (*sihok gikkau*)/optical structure [in Euro-American aesthetics] and *lingxu jiegou* (*linghui gikau*)/structure founded upon emptiness [in Chinese aesthetics]' (Lam 1983: 58). Lam (1983: 60) traces the former to the aesthetics of Massacio (1401–1428) and Filippo Brunelleschi (1377–1446) during the Quattrocento period, which, for him, formalizes a set of *fuma*/signs that enabled artists to construct a 'hypothetical space', which has the effect of inscribing a *toushi* (*tausi*)/penetrative gaze into a painting, one that carries a *yishi* (*jisik*)/consciousness. Similar to Baudry ([1975] 1976: 104–26) before him, Lam believes that such a penetrative gaze and the consciousness it carries are built into the *camera obscura*, and was then adopted in Euro-American cinema.

A theory similar to the Quattrocento aesthetics was indeed proposed in the eighteenth century by mathematician and painter Nian Xiyao (1678–1738) in his seminal work *Shixue/The Study of Vision* (Lam 1983: 81; Nian [1729] 2009), which was in itself based on the literary theory of Lu Ji (261–303) from the western Jin dynasty (265–316). In his 'Yan lianzhu'/'Performing a sequence of pearls', Lu Ji (1982: 92; quoted Lam 1983: 62) argues, '鑑之積也無厚，而照有重淵之深。'/'A mirror does not have any thickness, even though after all, it is an accumulation of matters; yet, when you observe it, it is as deep as a bottomless pool'.⁷ Lam argues that this line of spatial thinking inherited from eighteenth-century (or even third-century) China was remediated by the spatial structure and ideological construct of the Euro-American camera, and became the aesthetic basis of Chinese cinema (Lam 1983: 62).

Such theories of optical structure, however, are not the only dominant spatial consciousness of Chinese cinema. In his film analysis, Lam proposes that the Euro-American idea of analysing a film based on camera distances (e.g. close-up, medium shot, long shot) is inadequate. He adds to these camera distances the categories of *jinjing*/close scene, *zhongjing*/middle scene, and *yuanjing*/far scene. We can understand them as foreground,

middle-ground, and background; yet, Lam believes that these concepts came from the theatre, and is closer to the concepts of downstage, centre stage and upstage. The concept was indeed used by directors Zhang Shichuan (1889–1953 or 1890–1954), Hou Yao (1903–1942), Sang Hu (1916–2004), Zheng Junli (1911–1969), and Li Jun (1922–2013) in their own film analyses (Lam 1983: 62–63). As Zhang Shichuan (Cheng 1983: 113; quoted Lam 1983: 64) recalled, ‘When I shot *Nanfu nanqi/The Newly Weds* (1913), I only employed one camera distance: the long shot, with a scene that is neither too far nor too close’.

Lam argues that the preference for the middle scene (middle-ground or centre stage) in Chinese cinema is neither a matter of convenience nor an ignorance of film language. Rather, it came from a preference for the affective shock of *yuan*/distance confined within a small tangible canvas in a line of aesthetics that can be traced back to the Six dynasties (220 or 222–589). For painter Zong Bing (375–443), the paintings of his contemporary Zhang Xiao are usually:

豎劃三寸，當千仞之高，橫墨數尺，體百里之迴。

no more than three square *cun* [c. 1.72 square inches], yet it gives the beholder an impression that its ink reaches a height of a thousand *ren* [c. 7000 feet] and a width of a few *chi* [c. a few feet]; it allows the beholder to sense the bodily impact of travelling a hundred *li* [Chinese miles]. (Zong 1962: 1; quoted Lam 1983: 64)

For Lam, the principles of this line of aesthetics are *kong*/emptiness, *da*/immensity, and *kuo*/breadth. Yet these are not formal elements; rather, they are affects conveyed by delicate brushstrokes confined within the middle scene as a focal point of a hypothetical three-dimensional space (Lam 1983: 64).

More importantly, this penchant for conveying the affects of emptiness, immensity and breadth has been instrumentalized by many Chinese directors to convey social dialectics. For example, in the confined space of a middle scene, characters, objects or ideas that are dialectically opposite can be posited within the same temporal duration. Meanwhile, in a montage, Chinese directors preferred not to put into contrast characters, objects or ideas by sizes; rather, they prefer showing the same object from two dialectically conflicting perspectives, thus conveying the idea of *yi wu liang ti*/one object two bodies (Lam 1983: 66). For Lam, this kind of cinematic aesthetics:

uses the [European notion] of the penetrating gaze and [three-dimensional] focal point as its basis. However, by turning the middle scene of a frame into a conflictual space, cinema can be instrumentalized as an affective strategy, which would help its audience to understand the conflicts between two opposing camps, and the positions between the protagonists and the antagonists. Such cinema uses deep staging as an observation-reflection of the dialectics of the objective reality. The core element within in this form of internal montage is precisely the systematic preference of using the middle scene of a frame as a stage. (Lam 1983: 67)

In other words, the preference for the middle scene, for Lam, deconstructs the subject-object relationship embedded in the Quattrocento aesthetics, and with it, the penetrating gaze of the ideological apparatus. And a creative use of this middle scene as a site of internal (and external) montage can effectively question the capitalist social relationships in socialist cinema. Translated into formal terms, Lam argues that Chinese cinema, based on the principles of the middle scene, invented a *youdong de kongjian yishi* (*jaudung dik hunggaan jisik*)/drifting spatial consciousness:

1. It privileges distance. The camera would first leave some room for heaven and earth; it then posits the [dramatic] scene in the middle-ground of a three dimensional space;
2. In the production design, most objects are positioned on the two sides of the frame, which maintain a distance from the hypothetical foreground of the image (or the *front edge* of the screen); the longer the distance is, the farther away these objects would be from the centre;
3. Human figures and objects can be distributed on the upper and lower parts of the frame, or the foreground and the background; they are not bound by the penetrating gaze, and they do not necessarily recede towards the vanishing point. The relationships between objects are best understood not in terms of depth (under the penetrating gaze), but in terms of flatness. (Lam 1983: 68)

In drifting, since the spatial consciousness as a whole does not rely on the Quattrocento codifying system, according to Lam, the camera does not inscribe a penetrating gaze onto the image. The frame therefore no longer delimits the spatial boundary of the dramatic stage; instead, it allows the film-makers to impart to the viewers' bodies the sensations of emptiness, immensity, and breadth, i.e. the larger space of which the dramatic stage is only a part. In addition, drifting also enables the viewers' eyes and intellect to focus on the dialectical relationships that are being staged in the middle scene.

For Lam, cinema ontology in Chinese film thinking during the Republican period centred around the notion of mirroring, and can be divided into three categories: (1) *Xiezheng*/Writing reality, which 'presumes that the image never leaves any trace on the mirror, and that the mirror simply reflects whatever object it comes across'; (2) *Jinghuan*/Mirror-

imagination, which is based on Yogachara Buddhism, with the notion that ‘when all phenomena disappear, there is no longer any image in retrospect’; (3) *Jingjian*/Mirror-reflection or observation-reflection, which proposes that the cinema is a mirror, which borrows the objects it reflects in order to serve as a reflection of the audience. The idea of ‘writing reality’ considers the relationship between the viewer and the image as one between an object and an object, while the notion of ‘mirror-imagination’ regards such a relationship as one conjured up by the viewer as the subject herself or himself. Meanwhile, the notion of mirror-reflection is a reconfiguration of ‘writing reality’ and ‘mirror-imagination’ by juxtaposing them into a dialectical relationship inflected by the Marxist discourse in the 1930s (Lam 1983: 72–75).

Without denying the process of mirroring in the cinematographic image and perception, Lam propounds that Chinese cinema’s notion of drifting produces a unique spatial consciousness called a ‘structure founded upon emptiness’. Formally speaking, a spatial structure founded upon emptiness:

1. Collapses the divide between the centre and the margins, i.e. the composition neither privileges a given spot nor any given point of concentration. Rather, it invites the eye to look up and down, far and near, depending on the time and space in which the frame is posited;
2. Allows the relationship between the close scene, middle scene and the far scene within a frame to expand or contract. The frame *envelops both large and small nuclei of scenes, which in turn open to limitless nuclei of possibilities*. The image and the spatial relationships it conveys in fact drifts in accordance with the ideational environments of the viewers;

3. Stages a set of dialectical relationships within the confines of the frame's middle scene. They are mutually related yet separated, thus allowing them to collide, contest, and complement each other, and creating numerous variations. (Lam 1983: 76)

Lam argues that in Chinese cinema, *space* is best understood not as a state; rather, it is a spatiotemporal process of becoming. Based on the aesthetics of Guo Xi (1000–1087), Lam believes that there are three forms of distance: *pingyuan*/distance on a horizontal plane, *gaoyuan*/distance in height, and *shenyuan*/distance in depth. These distances draft in accordance with the viewer's readiness to *tui*/push or drive her or his senses and mental environments (Guo 1962: 23; Lam 1983: 77). In other words, the aesthetics of drifting is not founded upon what the camera or the viewer sees, but what potentialities can be engendered in the process of *mirroring*.

Conclusion

The core of Lam's theory, I argue, is the potentiality of the cinema to reconfigure the relationship between the subject and the object. Neither subjectivization nor desubjectivization truly interest him; rather, drifting deconstructs the fixed positions of the subject and object inscribed onto the image and the spectatorial body as dictated by the Quattrocento aesthetics and enables both the image and the body to constantly create and engender (as in Bergson's notion of the vital impetus) new potentialities. Such new potentialities allow the spectators to sense and intellectually grasp the fluidity, interchangeability, and mutual dependency of the constantly renewed and revised intersubjective relationships, and to explore what other possibilities are there when the

relationship between the subject and the object is suspended. Lam's penchant to privilege the process of suspending the subject-object relationship, I propose, is best understood in political terms as an attempt in post-war Hong Kong to re-examine the relationship between the subject and the object, motivated by a subjectival crisis embedded within the social, cultural, and political complexity of the historical period. What Lam implies, but not explicitly discusses, is that when all spatial and social relationships are suspended, the spectators and the image as one is no longer a form of spatial consciousness. Rather, it is time-in-itself or *durée* that drives the time that remains on a temporal plane of emptiness.

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The editor of this book is actually Chen Guying. *Zhuangzi* is one of those classics that has been historically attributed to Zhuangzi himself. Hence, one option is to list Zhuangzi as the author, and Chen Guying as the editor. Nonetheless, Zhuangzi's authorship is a contestable question. Hence, a common solution is to list the editor only in this case.

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Notes

¹ The term 'Chinese film theory' has been contested on two grounds: (1) whether film theory and criticism, which was developed out of a cross-cultural epistemological space between Euro-America and China, under colonialism and semi-colonialism, should be considered specifically 'Chinese'; (2) whether the idea of theory, a concept constructed primarily after World War II in Western Europe, should be applied to the critical discourse on the cinema in a non-Euro-American context. For the question of 'Chineseness', see Chow (1998: 1–24); for a general discussion of this issue, see Fan (2015a: 4–8).

² This claim here is based on my conversations with Hong Kong film critic Po Fung in the summer of 2013 and 2014, and with film scholar Shu Kei in the summer of 2014.

³ See, for example, film magazines and newspapers including (the years listed are the ones currently available in the Hong Kong Film Archive and various libraries) *Daguan zazhi* (*Daaigun zaapzi*)/*Grandview Magazine* (1936), *Daguan bao* (*Daaigwong bou*)/*Great Light* (1935), *Guohua bao* (*Gwokwaa bou*)/*National Blossom* (1936), *Lingxing/Ling Sing* (1937–1949), *Huanan dianying* (*Hwaanaan dinjing*)/*South China Cinema* (1944), *Huanghou dianying* (*Wonghau dinjing*)/*Queen's Theatre Gazette* (1930–1932), *Jinling* (*Gamling*)/*Golden Bell* (1938), *Lingxing ribao* (*Lingsing jatbou*)/*Stage and Screen Actors Daily* (1931–49), *Nanyue* (*Naamjyut*)/*South China* (1937–39), *Yilin* (*Ngailam*)/*Art Lane* (1937–1941), *Tianxing dianying yuekan* (*Tinsing dinjing jyuthon*)/*The Star Pictorial* (1936), *Xinshijie yingbao* (*Sansaigaai jingbou*)/*The World Camera Speaks* (1940), *Xiyuan zazhi* (*Heijyun zaapzi*)/*The Theatre Guide* (1932), *Yingtian banyuekan* (*Jingtaam bunjyuthon*)/*The Lee Theatre Gazette* (1949–1952), *Ying yu xi* (*Jing jyu hei*)/*Film and Theatre* (1936), *Youyou* (*Jaujau*)/*Carefree Drifting* (1935–1937), *Zhongynag xiyuan shengguang zhoukan* (*Zungjoeng heijyun singgwong zauhon*)/*Central Theatre Weekly* (1928–1931). See also a list provided by Lam Nin-tung in Lam (1978: 3).

⁴ Solomon's case study is post-Cold-War Taiwan, and his use of the concept of biopolitical lives comes from Agamben ([1995] 1998: 1–2). Agamben in turn draws his idea from Foucault ([1976] 2002: 178).

⁵ I am aware that my dates of the 'Cold War' in China are datable. I set 1987 as the 'end' as the ROC officially declared the end of the martial law, which effectively ended its engagement in a state of war against the PRC.

⁶ Elsewhere, I compared this concept with Shih Shu-mei's idea of semicolonialism (Shih: 2001: 34–35).

⁷ The title 'Yan lianzhu'/'Performing a sequence of pearls' is indeed the name of a poetic genre, which is a poem structured by a chain of interrelated political allegories.